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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY JESSIE B. RITTENHOUSE, EDWARD PORRITT AND BRANDER
MATTHEWS.

"LETTERS OF THE WORDSWORTH FAMILY."*

UPON the assumption that no form of biography is at once so intimate, authentic and delightful as letters, Professor William Knight, who has done such admirable work in the study of Wordsworth, supplements his former labor by the publication of all the available letters of the poet, from his early youth to his death, together with those which throw illuminating side-lights upon his life and personality, by his wife, his sister, his daughter, his son-in-law and Sarah Hutchinson.

It would seem, at this date, that all the Wordsworth correspondence must have found its way into biographies and memoirs, but, on the contrary, a large number of these letters appear for the first time, and among them a group from Wordsworth and Dorothy to Coleridge, covering a period of eight years after their association at Alfoxden, discovered only in the autumn of 1906 by Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, grandson of the poet, among the effects of Miss Quillinan of Loughrigg Holm.

These letters alone, with their poignant interest, written out of the painful hope and fear of those first years of Coleridge's weakness, would render invaluable these volumes, even though unsupplemented by many others to friends of Coleridge in which one obtains a newly vivid and ineffaceable impression of this most magical mind of his epoch.

So inextricable is Coleridge's life from that of Wordsworth and so does he dominate the latter's thought, even in absence,

* "Letters of the Wordsworth Family. From 1787 to 1855." Collected and edited by William Knight. In three volumes. Boston and London: Ginn & Co., publishers.

that his influence upon Wordsworth, as revealed in these letters, becomes psychic, as if a spirit hovered ever behind. Literature affords no parallel to this association, in its inner sympathy and outward diversity. One follows Wordsworth in his harmonious, luminous life, as a planet held aloft in an unswerving orbit by the gravity of the spiritual law, and Coleridge, in his passionate and losing strife, as an errant star in perilous deflection, unpoised, at last, but lighting the bounds of space as it falls.

A new reading of Coleridge is, in many respects, made necessary by the intimate disclosures of these letters. The irrevocable mistake of his life, that of his marriage, assumes a significance not attached to it in his biographies, and its negative and disintegrating effect upon him is seen to have influenced his habits more than his habits reacted upon his life. The sordid, superficial, undivining nature of Mrs. Coleridge, concerned, even in her misfortune, but with the world's comment, was so alien and repellent to that of Coleridge that even the formal bond between them became a spiritual perversion. The accepted impression that Coleridge deliberately deserted his family, after succumbing to his weakness, is greatly modified by the evidence of these letters, wherein one learns of the years in which he struggled for adjustment of impossible conditions and gave the marvellous powers of his mind to the foredoomed task of developing in Mrs. Coleridge qualities, both of intellect and temperament, which nature had denied her. The stultifying effect of this association, and the subsequent discord and wretchedness which it entailed, are forces not sufficiently reckoned with in appraising the aborted genius of Coleridge. One may reckon them better by contrast with what he produced in the "miraculous year" of his first association with the Wordsworths.

In his turn, Coleridge acted as a fuse to the slow-moving, contemplative mind of Wordsworth, whose genius sympathy alone could render creative. Had Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge been removed from his life, he must have remained the diffuse moralist of the "Prelude" and "Excursion" upon which, in his critical blindness, he placed the emphasis of his claim to recognition. No poet had ever such imperturbable confidence in his own immortality, nor miscalculated more, perhaps, the specific work by which his faith would be justified.

In a letter to Lady Beaumont he cites Coleridge as saying that "every great and original writer must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished," and so discloses the source, or the striking parallel, of a line of our own great cosmic egoist, Walt Whitman, "I myself create the only taste by which I can be appreciated." Apropos of Wordsworth as a source for other poets, one is newly reminded by these letters that Théophile Gautier's exquisite "*L'Art*" is almost a paraphrase of certain lines written by Wordsworth as an inscription for a niche of Lady Beaumont's winter garden.

Upon the borrowings of his contemporaries, Wordsworth was severe enough, and his egoism often led him into absurd suspicions and strictures, such as that in a letter to Henry Taylor, accusing Byron of purloining his own conception of nature:

"So far as I am acquainted with his works, they [his obligations to Wordsworth] are most apparent in the third canto of 'Childe Harold,' not so much in particular expressions, though there is no want of these, as in the tone (assumed rather than natural) of enthusiastic admiration of nature and a sensibility to her influence. Of my writings you need read no more than the blank verse to the River Wye to be convinced of this."

Wordsworth's antipathy to Byron was fundamental, ineradicable, whereas Byron, having repented him of his early folly, became a genuine admirer of Wordsworth, but those critics who, following Wordsworth's own lead, can find in Byron's lava-poured lines the meditative Wordsworthian mood, must possess a richer equipment of imagination than of insight.

The philosophical so predominated in Wordsworth, that he could not tolerate the personal nor admit its claim to perpetuity, and were it not for the supplementary letters of his family, we should have, from this correspondence, no more notion of Wordsworth's personality than of that of a being from another sphere. On the contrary, no biography yet written of him may be placed with these letters in unfolding, in sequence and symmetry, the progress of his art. For Wordsworth's life was hidden in his art, his self-expression is purely spiritual and, in this regard, more complete than that of any of his fellow poets.

It follows that Wordsworth was deficient in charm as a letter-writer; charm, as such, fleeing the abstract, detached and impersonal. The constitutional trouble with Wordsworth as a corre-

spondent was identical with that which, in the absence of inspiration, afflicted him as a poet, his inability to forget himself and give free course to his impulses. He contemplates himself and his own emotions, chiefly moral, until his letters become homilies. When he touches upon personality, it is at once robbed of its essence. Compare his comment to Francis Wrangham, upon Mary Hutchinson, soon to be his bride,

“Miss Hutchinson I can recommend to you as a most amiable and good creature, with whom you would converse with great pleasure,”

with

“She was a phantom of delight,

A lovely apparition, sent

To be a moment's ornament”—

and one will understand the distinction between Wordsworth as a correspondent and Wordsworth as a poet. Nevertheless, he holds one, even in his letters, by a singular spell. As the range of his correspondence is wide, no phase of his mind is left uninterpreted. Social and political conditions are treated more fully, perhaps, than matters of art. The letters comprise a long series to Sir George and Lady Beaumont, to Henry Crabb Robinson, to Coleridge, Scott, Southey, De Quincey, Samuel Rogers, Cottle, “Christopher North,” Henry Reed, of Philadelphia, with many isolated letters of great interest, such as that to Gladstone, in regard to the Laureateship.

Interspersed throughout the volumes, as they occur chronologically, are the intimate and delightful letters of Dorothy Wordsworth and other members of the poet's family, which relieve the gravity of his own and leaven the collection with the magnetic personal quality, the charm, which Wordsworth himself lacked. One is impressed constantly by the manner in which all those associated with Wordsworth conduced to his art; not from coercion, but from voluntary sympathy. No poet was ever companioned more inspiringly nor sustained by greater faith. Had he not been poised and buttressed in hope, he must have been unresponsive to all spiritual sympathy.

In their store of fresh material, illuminating, by both data and comment, the characters of most of Wordsworth's great contemporaries; in the light flashed upon his own nature from many facets, and in the complete expression of his opinions upon sub-

jects of permanent interest,—these letters will henceforth be indispensable to the student of Wordsworth, and they supply much that will be invaluable to future biographies, not only of Wordsworth, but of his fellow poets.

JESSIE B. RITTENHOUSE.

DELANE, OF "THE TIMES." *

IF there is any one department of English biography that is lean and weak it is the biography of newspaper editors. Not more than three or four of these biographies have appeared since the *Life of Baines*, of the "*Leeds Mercury*," was published in 1851; and those of Robinson, of the "*Daily News*," and Cowen, of the "*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*," to recall only the more recently published biographies, are proof of the difficulty that seems to be experienced in depicting the life and work of men in the front rank of English journalism—men who have built up great newspapers. Mr. Dasent had an unusual opportunity; for as the nephew of Delane he was in possession of more correspondence and other valuable data concerning the "*Times*" in the period when it was outdistancing all its London competitors, creating standards in newspaper work that were maintained all over England and unchallenged for half a century and firmly establishing its place as the world's greatest newspaper, than were ever in the possession of any man who was about to write the life of an editor, or deal with an epoch-making period in the history of British journalism. He has adequately grasped Delane's close relations with the statesmen and politicians of the period between 1840 and 1879, when he was editor of the "*Times*." Mr. Dasent realizes, and he makes the reader realize, that no other English editor was ever so long or so closely in touch with the men of both political parties who were governing England during Delane's reign at the "*Times*" office. He shows how anxious these statesmen were to stand well with Delane; how at times they deferred to him in larger as well as in minor affairs of state; and the extent to which Delane was taken into their counsels and confidence. Mr. Dasent claims all

* "*John Thaddeus Delane: Editor of 'The Times.' His Life and Correspondence.*" By Arthur Irwin Dasent. With Portraits and Other Illustrations. Two Volumes, pp. ix, 328; vii, 376. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons.